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War Unit Rationale

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War

This unit is intended to parallel the students' study of the Vietnam War in their U.S. history class. However, studying the war in a language arts class provides students with the opportunity to explore the events surrounding the Vietnam War from a different perspective and a different educational style. Rather than just reviewing the history of the war, this unit will encourage students to think about how the Vietnam War relates to their own lives, and in a broader sense, students may begin to consider some cause and effect relationships and consequences of our current war. Students will use writing and reading creatively through poetry, essay, and film assignments. Studying the literature of the Vietnam War can foster such social, political, and ideological development in a way that is interesting and relevant to students. Unfortunately, war has, and most likely will always be a part of human nature. Civilizations have been waging war over religion, resources, and political differences since the beginning of time. War has affected all of us in some way. Many people have friends or relatives who are part of the armed forces and some have the difficult decisions of making decisions in regards to war. Our current economic situation may not be as tumultuous if our country were not currently involved in combat. The Vietnam War shares many characteristics with our current skirmish in Iraq. Much like Vietnam, our current enemies are hidden. We are not facing an enemy who wears a uniform or shoulders a flag as they march into battle.

Throughout the unit, we have incorporated text, various poems, songs, internet sources and films of the Vietnam War. Using multiple formats will allow the students to analyze and compare the different experiences and issues surrounding the Vietnam War and our current war. We will explore the past, present, and future of war. We will also look at the larger effects of war, while taking a personal look at ourselves and the effects of war. We would like to share

with students the impact of the Vietnam War on our current society and ask the question, “Has history already repeated itself in 40 short years?” We believe that a study of the Vietnam War literature will be highly interesting and relevant to adolescents.

Vietnam War literature encompasses the adolescent experience. This is because much of the literature of the Vietnam War is written through the eyes of narrators not much older than our students, which allows students to relate to the ideas and themes prevalent in the materials of this unit. Several students after high school plan on joining a sector of the armed forces. Reading a piece of literature describing a war similar to the current war will help put many things into perspective. It may encourage some to want to fight for their country and for others; it may encourage them to fight for peace. Burke states, “literacy is the ability to access, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and communicate information and ideas in a variety of forms depending on the purpose of that occasion” (338). By using O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, we hope to encourage students to using multiple forms of educational tools to convey their views on a particular subject.

Poetry has been used to express one’s thoughts on almost every topic imaginable, and war is not an exception. For instance, many students are not aware that our National Anthem was a poem before it became a song. Reading poetry will give students the opportunity to explore someone’s imaginative writings on the topic of war. Students will subjectively and creatively study poetry and use it effectively to convey one’s thoughts. Using several poems, such as, “O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!” by Walt Whitman, “FACING IT” by Yusef Komunyakaa, and “LOSSES” by Randall Jarrell will help students understand the significance of what we as a nation have been through in regards to war.

We will begin with a discussion that explores the students' knowledge of American involvement in various wars. Ask if some of them have relatives or family friends who have served in a war and what effect war has had on that person or on his or her family. We may ask them to go home and ask about the impact of war in their family histories. Once students have shared their stories, or a poem (personal or one they have found), we will discuss some poems written by or about veterans. Charlie Frankenbach states, “poetry helps students recognize the function of connotation, denotation, symbolism, and imagery...knowledge of these techniques is integrally related to critical thinking, and students can use this knowledge effectively in confronting the language of commercial and political persuaders (Indian University, “Teaching Poetry: Generating Genuine, Meaningful Responses,” par. 9). This section will help students understand, through poetry, the significance of war in American and world history and in American lives.

A focus of the lessons will be through the use of films, such as *Full Metal Jacket* (dialogue/symbolism), *We Were Soldiers* (music/symbolism), and *Forrest Gump* (imagery/symbolism). We will focus on particular elements of these films. Elements like the use of music, use of the camera, gestures and speech and how these evoke character, dialogue and language in general, and of course the plot of the Vietnam War.

“We know that for many of our students, film is a much more readily accessible than print because of the visual nature and immediacy of the medium, but the very things that films do for us, good and active readers of literature have to do for themselves. This philosophy reflects most classroom teachers’ approach to reader-response theory in that students should try to put themselves into a text before beginning the formal analysis and synthesis. All film does is make this leap easier (36, *Reading in the Dark*).”

The scene in Full Metal Jacket where the main character Joker (Matthew Modine) is talking with a commander in the Army. The scene's dialogue gives a glimpse to the dual perspectives of pro-war and anti-war viewpoints. It is a gruesome scene near a mass grave of Viet Kong Gorillas. Joker has Born to Kill on his helmet and a peace symbol on his jacket. The commander in the scene sees this and explains what is wrong with the symbolism the soldier is carrying. The music in We Were Soldiers is used as a symbol for the oath the commander (Mel Gibson) gives his soldiers before going into battle. He states that he will be the first to arrive and the last to leave. The moment that sets foot off the helicopter onto land till when he final gets back onto the helicopter at the end there is a distinct tune playing. The song is used as a symbol of the commander's oath. The costumes in a scene from Forrest Gump show Lt. Dan (Gary Sinece) explaining how a family member of his has died in every American war. The director shows the same scene over and over using Gary Sinece, but he is wearing different uniforms to represent each American War. This shows how visual imagery is used by directors and writers to symbolize something else. We will use films to give a more visual representation of the Vietnam War. Students will learn aspects of film to better comprehend the movie scenes.

Many parents or administrators may have concerns with subjective teachings of war in our classroom. This unit directs attention to the soldier's experience. We do not plan on bringing a particular view to this unit; we will let the texts speak and let the students surmise their own thoughts, with the help of guided questions. We will discuss the pro-war views along with the anti-war views in America. Both will be given equal time and the class will look at both sides of the war argument and each student will come to his or her own conclusion through evidence provided in the texts read during this unit.

In closing of the unit, students will debate the benefits and the downfalls of war.

Students can use text or other materials they acquired in and out of class, or personal experiences they may have encountered with friends or family. At this time, they may share certain aspects of their essays or some of their poetry. Students will show their knowledge of the unit by citing their arguments, yet making sure to keep the discussion topical. They will show a clear grasp of the unit; however, students will take information from the unit to establish a worthwhile opinion on the topic of war.

References

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Rational Based on:

http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/VirtualLibrary/Heess_Stembridge.pdf

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